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# **The socialisation and leader identity development of school leaders in Southern African countries**

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## **Abstract**

**Purpose:** The purpose of this study was to explore the socialisation and leader identity development of school leaders in Southern African countries.

**Design/method:** The study utilised a survey of qualitative data where data collection primarily involved in-depth interviews with school principals and deputy principals of both primary and secondary schools.

**Findings:** Findings revealed that early socialisation to leadership transpired during childhood and early schooling at which points in time the characteristics and values of leadership integral to the participants' leadership practice were acquired. Initial teacher training was found to be significant in introducing principalship role conception. Leader identity was also found to develop outside the context of school through pre-socialising agents long before the teaching and leading roles are assumed.

**Originality/value:** The study presents an overview of the findings from four countries in Southern Africa, providing a complex process with overlapping stages of career socialisation. Existing research puts emphasis on formal leadership preparation as a significant part of socialisation – this study suggests alternatives for poorly resourced countries. Significantly, the paper improves our understanding that school leader identity is both internal and external to the school environment.

## **Introduction**

Leadership preparation has been identified as an important factor in the socialisation of school principals, particularly as the latter are faced with mounting global and local challenges. However, preparation for principalship has been found inadequate in many African countries, and this deficiency has been closely linked to ineffective leadership and poor performance in many schools (Bush and Oduro, 2006; Mathipa, 2007). In this regard, challenges confronting newly elected principals have been compounded by the lack of induction training into the role and limited opportunities for extended and consistent in-service training, acute shortage of resources and other social and contextual challenges in schools in Southern Africa (Bush and Oduro, 2006; Eacott and Asuga, 2014; Maringe and Moletsane, 2015; Stevenson, 2006). Some more recent studies (Asuga, Eacott and Scevak, 2015; Bush, Kiggundu and Moorosi, 2011; Naicker and Mestry, 2015; Pansiri, 2011) provide evidence of the presence of leadership preparation and development programmes in some African countries, such as Botswana, Kenya and South Africa. However, these programmes are often judged inadequate and their impact on practice is yet to be established.

Thus, there is an emerging body of research on school leadership preparation and development in sub-Saharan Africa (Bush and Oduro, 2006; Eacott and Asuga, 2014; Moorosi and Bush, 2011; Onguko, Abdalla and Webber, 2008; Otunga, Sereme and Kindiki, 2008; Pheko, 2008), which consistently notes a gap in the research into school leadership preparation and development in African countries. This literature argues for more localised knowledge that would help school leaders in this region continue to perform within their contexts while they, at the same time, meet the demands, challenges and accountability pressures faced by school principals across the globe. Given the apparent shortage of leadership preparation programmes

and their perceived inadequacy where they exist, our study sought to examine experiences of school leaders' socialisation across four Southern African countries, guided by the following questions:

- I. How do school leaders become socialised into the principalship role?
- II. What factors shape school principals' leadership identity development and how?
- III. How do leadership identity development and socialisation processes inform leadership development?

This study was premised on our understanding that leadership practice and leadership socialisation processes are informed not only by what occurs formally within the school, but also by what happens in the school leaders' broader local and social contexts. We were keen to examine how African school leaders are socialised into the leadership role, and asked questions that enabled a broad focus, encompassing all forms of socialisation and leader identity development processes. We envisaged that answers to these questions would help us work towards a better understanding of local and contextual practices, which could inform national policies and practices and a shared intercultural learning for improved school leadership preparation and development initiatives in Southern Africa and beyond. We therefore framed the study on an existing framework - career socialisation theory, taking on board the criticisms advanced by Eacott and Asuga (2014) and Pansiri (2011) on the problematic nature of applying western theories to non-western contexts. However, we regard the use of an existing analytical framework (albeit western) as a helpful starting point that enabled us to ask relevant contextual questions that facilitate the understanding of local practice.

### **School leadership socialisation: a theoretical framework**

Career socialisation theory with specific focus on school leadership has been used and developed by several authors over the years from Brim and Wheeler (1966), Merton (1968), Van Maanen and Schein (1979), Greenfield (1985), Browne-Ferrigno (2003) and Crow (2006) in the United States to Gronn (1999); Ribbins (2008) and Cottrell and James (2016) in the United Kingdom. In sociological terms, [career] socialisation theory suggests that in order for one to perform a social role (which is how we understand leadership) adequately, one has to acquire the necessary knowledge, skills and dispositions needed for the role (Brim and Wheeler, 1966; Greenfield, 1985). Brim and Wheeler (1966, p.5) have suggested that the acquisition of "habits, beliefs, attitudes and motives" enables individuals to perform the roles expected of them satisfactorily. Gronn (1999) went further on the socialisation processes of being and becoming a school leader and developed a life and career based framework for the study of educational leaders. More recent studies examining the socialisation of new principals have identified other factors of influence, including various socialising agents (Crow, 2006), socialisation tactics (Bengtson et al, 2013) and critical incidents (Cottrell and James, 2016) that facilitate socialisation into the new role. From this literature, the key enablers of socialisation are found to range from leadership training programmes to interaction with teachers, parents and students as agents (Crow, 2006) and principals' own personal characteristics and how they interact with the school contexts (Steyn, 2013). Crow and Glascock (1995) found that the conception of the principal role could be identified through principal observation, teacher experiences and non-education work experiences, while Browne-Ferrigno (2003) found leadership development programmes, experiences from the field and leadership readiness to be factors of influence as well as enablers of initial socialisation. These enablers of socialisation are located in different stages of the socialisation process, but as Brim and Wheeler (1966, p.5) importantly noted, role acquisition does not constitute the "entire content of socialisation".

Indeed, for us, the complete phenomenon of principalship socialisation could only be understood through analysis of the various stages of socialisation.

School leadership socialisation has thus become associated with the transition one makes from being a teacher to being a principal, a complex changeover marked by “a complex role and identity change involving considerable challenge and dissonance” which requires a broadening in role performance from “competence” to “confidence” (Brody, Vissa and Weathers, 2010: 614). Understanding this transition and its complexity requires a framework that looks not only at the professional and organisational aspects of socialisation but also at the pre-organisational life of a school principal (Crow, 2006; Ribbins, 2008; Stevenson, 2006). Stevenson (2006, p.414) suggested that the learning and internalisation of school leadership roles are “best understood against a complex background of social, political and economic trends, operating both simultaneously and interdependently on a global, national and local scale”. This means that what influences school leaders’ socialisation and shapes their leader identity development is located not only within the school but also within contexts surrounding the school (Bengtson et al, 2013; Crow, 2006). Therefore, as deployed in this study, career socialisation theory encompasses four stages of socialisation (anticipatory, professional, organisational and personal) that may or may not happen successively.

*Anticipatory socialisation*, which has been associated with the beginning of the teaching career, continues to transpire until one takes up a principalship role (Crow, 2006). However, others (Kramer, 2010; Ribbins, 2008) have argued that the process can commence from early childhood, wherein a future principal is first socialised into “deep-rooted norms and values by the action and interaction” of agencies such as family, school and local community (Ribbins, 2008, p. 65). These pre-socialising agencies “shape personality”, thereby generating a conception of self that influences attitude, dispositions and style of leadership that a future principal will carry into the role (ibid).

*Professional socialisation* occurs as one becomes a member of the profession and identifies with the profession over time (Heck, 1995). This acquisition of new knowledge and skills often required to lead schools (Bush, 2016) can be either by design through preparation training programmes or by accident through job experiences, thus implying the on-going and incremental nature of the process (Duke, 1987). When it happens mainly through preparation programmes, professional socialisation tends to be inadequate, as it does not guarantee the degree to which leadership learning will be internalised and institutionalised, or the extent to which incumbents will actually be prepared for change oriented contexts (Crow, 2006).

It is this perceived inadequacy in professional socialisation that creates a vacuum, thereby giving primacy to the third stage of *organisational socialisation* (Bengtson et al, 2013). Organisational socialisation involves learning “the ropes” of a particular organisational role (Crow and Glascock, 1995; Greenfield, 1985:3) and tends to be unique and contextualised to the local ecology (Weindling and Dimmock, 2006). Nonetheless, the stage is perceived to manifest many complexities wherein insider and outsider experiences may differ (Weindling and Dimmock, 2006), although it remains a continuous and life-long process spanning the entire career of an individual.

Finally, *personal socialisation* takes place as one learns and internalises the roles and changes in self-identity (Crow, 2006), thereby enabling an individual leader to make “sense of their identity within the workplace” (Cottrell and James, 2016, p.7). This also involves the leader seeing himself or herself as a change agent or an “advocate of social justice” (Crow, 2006, p.318), hence “identifying with the wider view of schools while creating an image of their role” (Cottrell and James, 2016, p.7). As personal socialisation tends to overlap with other stages, the distinctions amongst these become blurred, with this particular phase spanning the entire career.

Thus, throughout the literature, different sources, processes and outcomes of socialisation have been identified (Brody et al, 2010; Crow, 2006), leading to the conclusion that leader identity development is the ultimate outcome of socialisation, consisting of both role conceptualisation and role internalisation (Brody et al, 2010). Brody et al suggest that socialisation is itself a complex process that is shaped by the interaction of different agencies from the childhood to the adulthood of the future leader (also Ribbins, 2008). This suggests that socialisation for the principalship starts before entry into the position and that it is not a linear process but rather an iterative one wherein one's self-assessment is constantly affirmed or disaffirmed by others throughout the different stages. In fact, Cottrell and James (2016) have argued that the complexity of the organisation and that of the individual necessitates change, thereby making socialisation itself an on-going, career long process that culminates in a fully developed leader identity.

The literature suggests that a fully developed leader identity happens overtime (Lord and Hall, 2005; Miscenko, Guenter and Day, 2017) developing and crystallising through the process of socialisation. Normore (2003) identified professional leader identity as the most challenging aspect for the new principals as they still mostly identify as teachers. To facilitate the transition, Brody et al (2010) suggested a more direct activity to try on the framework of a conceptualised role within a like-minded community that can both facilitate identity development and reinforce values and norms of which it is comprised. "The interaction between this idealised role and one's own behaviour contributes to a professional identity" (Brody et al, 2010: 615), and can occur in or outside the principalship. Browne-Ferrigno (2003) established that even leadership preparation programmes were not enough to develop a leadership identity, while Brody et al (2010) argued that role conceptualisation can exist for an individual outside of a training programme or an active leadership role, hence the need to look beyond formal leadership settings. As practicing school leaders the more they understand their roles and expectations in these roles, the more they understand who they are, thereby developing a stronger professional identity as school leaders. When leader identity is crystallised, leaders can conform, innovate or rebel (amongst others) (Crow, 2006), thereby asserting their own individualism as leaders.

## **Methodology**

In-depth, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were held with school principals and deputy principals of both primary and secondary schools in Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia and South Africa between 2013 and 2015. Although the focus of the study was upon socialisation for principalship, deputy principals were included in the sample for validity purposes and Heads of Department (HoDs) were used where deputy principals were not available. In total, 89 interviews lasting about an hour each were conducted with 40 male and 49 female school leaders. In this paper, we provide an overview of the socialisation process of school leaders and draw evidence from the interview data set. Although we treated each country as a case study in its own right, it is not our intention to provide an in-depth analysis of any one case, nor provide a comprehensive comparison of the four countries. We draw from data that illustrate and help provide insight into different aspects of the socialisation processes. In so doing, we acknowledge the "depth versus breadth trade-off" (Johnson and Christensen, 2008, p. 409), and believe that by analysing these case studies collectively, deeper insights into the phenomenon have been furnished than if the analysis had been done individually.

### *Selection of participants*

The participating countries were selected on grounds of convenience and easy access as they all share the border with South Africa where we were based at the time. To a large extent, the

selection of participants was conveniently facilitated through researcher contacts initially, which were used to gain access into individual districts or regions where lists of participating schools were provided. Principals were contacted telephonically and invited, together with their deputy principals, to participate in the study. There were inevitable variations in the participants' selection framework due to the different approaches and experiences on the ground. However, care was taken to include almost an equal number of primary and secondary schools and maintain a balanced view between principals and deputy principals. It is worth noting however, that schools involved in this study within all four countries were ordinary public schools regulated by the state, including those run by churches in Lesotho. The participating schools were mostly located in the urban and semi-urban areas and where there was better access to resources than most of the ordinary schools in the larger contexts under study. The majority of the institutions also happened to be relatively well performing schools wherein principals were driven and highly qualified through self-initiated postgraduate study. However, the self-reporting nature of the school principals' accounts were cross validated by views of the deputy principals and/or HoDs.

#### *Data collection: Interviewing*

In this study, we relied on interviews as a primary means to collect data. Kvale (1996) suggests that interviews are particularly suited for understanding the meanings of participants' own lived experiences, describing their self-understandings. We conducted one-to-one semi-structured in-depth interviews following an interview guide with themes. Questions were informed by an understanding of the socialisation process that suggested a focus on the participants' life experiences. As we were interested in all forms of influences that could possibly suggest influences of leadership, questions asked of participants' memory of childhood to career experiences. A sample of baseline questions is provided in Table 1 below. Although we used a similar guide across the four countries, we allowed for the development of unique experiences in any one particular site. These interviews were fully transcribed to facilitate data analysis.

Table 1: Sample of baseline questions

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What childhood experiences have been most memorable and influential to your career?

What activities or clubs or organisations did you get involved in at school and college and how did they influence you?

How did you develop an interest in the teaching career?

Can you explain when and how you became aware of your leadership potential?

What leadership opportunities have had most impact on you and why?

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#### *Data analysis*

By way of data analysis, after full transcription of interviews, an open method of coding was used in order to identify common themes and patterns of difference (Braun and Clarke, 2012) in the individual interviews, within each case in the first instance, and across the four cases, in the second instance. A narrative approach to data analysis reflecting school leaders' accounts of socialisation involved reading of transcripts and coding them with themes emerging from the data. Common experiences within a particular phase of life, such as *childhood*

*responsibilities* were coded and cross-referenced with those from the socialisation framework. Broad divisions between school leaders' socialisation stages were identified: anticipatory, professional, organisational and personal and a cross-case analysis was then performed across the four cases (countries) to compare and contrast socialisation practices as well as leader identity development processes. Due to the large amount of data, the detailed analysis on each phase of the framework was conducted in one country dataset, so that finally quotes that could represent interviewees' experiences were drawn from countries that demonstrated strength in a particular phase. The findings and discussion section uses the four stages of career socialisation theory to make sense of the data. Necessary steps were taken to observe the relevant ethical principles at every stage of the research process.

## **Findings and discussion**

In this section we present an overview of the findings for illustrative purposes, rather than a detailed case by case analysis. We use the [predetermined] phases of the socialisation framework as broad themes under which we use illuminating extracts from the data. As all countries could not be represented equally in this regard, we foreground the most insightful findings from at least one country for each section, while triangulating this with the experiences of participants in the other countries.

### *Anticipatory socialisation*

Participants were asked about the childhood experiences that had influenced their adulthood and career in school leadership. *Childhood responsibilities* and *family values* emerged as pre-socialising experiences (Ribbins, 2008) that were experienced before the start of the teaching career. These experiences were neither directly linked to school leadership nor to teaching, but were early forms of socialisation that were sub-consciously influential in developing participants' early characteristics of leadership, personalities and value-systems that later shaped their school leadership practices. Some of the typical primary socialisation experiences through early childhood influences are demonstrated in the extract below:

“[I am], after my sister the eldest son so all the responsibility were on me in terms of herding cattle, managing farming, helping the father. The expectation was very high, you know it was sort of preparing you for leadership role to play in the family, it was a bit hard.” [Male Principal, Botswana].

The influence of patriarchy, wherein male and female participants were socialised into gendered roles was strong in the data. For the female participants, some typical experiences included taking care of younger siblings, working in the fields and sometimes assuming overall responsibility for the household. While these may have been typical gender role socialisation within the family, they also served to prepare the participants for the leadership role in the public sphere. Such experiences instilled discipline through enabling participants to do things in a timely manner and correctly. With regard to participants who had performed the duties of herd boys, livestock had to be taken out for grazing at a particular time in the morning and be herded home punctually in the evening. As another male principal reported, it was known that “there would be consequences should any of them get lost”. Thus, despite some of their parents being quite strict at times, as children, the participants learnt punctuality, responsibility and competence, which instilled a strong sense of responsibility that they found valuable when they became school leaders.

*Family values* were also significant in shaping leaders' characters, personalities and leadership practice. These values included sharing, respect for elders, Christian values, love for

education and being part of the wider community. As an example offered by one of the participants, the value of sharing communicated to children shaped leadership practice when they were adults in the following way:

“Sharing, sharing, my grandmother always said we need to share. ... I think the issue of sharing has influenced me a lot ... I think in management we are five, and whatever idea I have we normally sit down and share, I have this new idea, what do you think about ... because if you do it alone people won’t own up the decision” (Female principal, Botswana).

This extract shows how some of the values instilled at home can become influential in later life. In this way, participants’ early life experiences suggest a pattern of early dispositions of leadership attributable to family, school and community, thereby confirming the incidence of early leadership socialisation from childhood. We found these experiences to be quite significant in terms of the formation of personalities, characters and dispositions (McKillop and Moorosi, 2017; Ribbins, 2008) of future school leaders. Although many of the participants had not thought about these experiences or their significance before, reflecting upon them created awareness of their importance as precursors and pre-socialisation experiences of [school] leadership. This finding aligns with Ribbins (2008) who found that family was a potent unconscious (pre)socialising agent before the start of the career.

Aside from childhood experiences, anticipatory socialisation was also evidenced in preparation for the *teaching career*. We found that all participants had started their careers as teachers before assuming leadership roles. This was perhaps unsurprising as it is normal practice and in keeping with observations by Bush (2016), Bush and Oduro (2006) and Crow (2006) that all school principals start their careers as teachers in the classroom. The teaching experience is thus itself a socialisation period as it exposes teachers [aspiring leaders] to the principal’s role advertently and inadvertently (Bush, 2016). Interestingly, initial teacher training appeared to be regarded as leadership preparation, which seemed to represent an unexpected anticipatory socialisation experience. Comments such as the one appended below illustrate the direct [albeit inadequate] preparatory role of initial teacher training:

“... when I was asked to head the school just six months into my teaching experience, I remembered the day my college lecturer asked what I would do if I would be asked to head a school on my first day at school” (Female principal, Lesotho).

Although this was very basic and introductory, and certainly not dedicated to leadership preparation, participants, conceptualising an administrative role from these teacher training programmes, were led to think about and build up knowledge and skills in anticipation of the principalship role ahead. Arguably, more benefit could have resulted from the programme, if it had been treated more intentionally as leadership preparation, with school leaders [as teacher trainees] being more conscious of the principalship role at the time of teacher training. This explains the current inadequacy of initial teacher training as preparation for leadership, as at the time of training, aspiring teachers have not yet developed an idealised vision of the principalship role against which to measure their actions (Brody et al, 2010).

Despite the obvious limitations in evidence, we found that initial teacher training programmes were a source, albeit unconscious and inadequate, of principal role conception. Greenfield (1995) suggested that role learning in the anticipation stage is "implicit" and "unwitting", as candidates are not yet part of the group but are likely to become a part of it. This early introduction of the principalship develops sensitivity to the role, which unwittingly serves as part of socialisation into school leadership. We add initial teacher training as the first



item to Crow and Glascock's (1995) list of major sources of principal role conception, and suggest that if used more consciously to introduce school principalship in the preparation of teachers, and studied more concertedly, it could provide an "opportunity to understand how ... beginning principals develop their instructional orientation" (Crow, 2006, p.317). Additionally, it could present the principalship as an attractive career progression route, particularly for young teachers and minority groups that may not normally conceive of principalship as a possible career move (Moorosi, 2017).

### *Professional socialisation*

Professional socialisation involves learning what it is to be a school leader, and this usually starts with training that prepares candidates for the principalship. A traditionally known form of professional socialisation is a dedicated preparatory training for aspiring principals, wherein skills and knowledge are taught to aspiring leaders. While our findings partly confirmed the absence of systematic preparatory training for the principalship for most participants, they revealed the different stages during which technical knowledge of school leadership can be acquired and the possible benefits thereof. Namibia was unique in that all participants (principals and HoDs) had received some form of formal leadership training before or after their appointment, while in Botswana, Lesotho and South Africa, it was mostly principals who had received only post appointment training. There are three related findings in this regard:

Firstly, we found evidence that in-service *professional development workshop training* provided by governments took place in all countries, although this training was ad hoc and inconsistent. Although in some instances there was evidence of a gap between theory and practice as shown in the quote below, they provided the necessary technical skills:

... when we went on these training courses, it always seemed so clear in the book, ... but when you come here, there's a week that you get minus, you get minus 20 or something like that ... (Male principal, South Africa).

For this principal, there was a clear gap between the content of the programmes and the actual reality of the context. Moreover, for participants from Lesotho and Botswana who had done their postgraduate studies in South Africa, there were also reports on content not being applicable to the participants' own contexts. We treat this finding with caution though, as the Namibian case was different. Cohorts of students from Namibia were found to have studied leadership and management postgraduate courses in South Africa, and although we did not scrutinise relevance of content, there were no reports to the contrary either. It is arguable that the latter case was due to the fact that Namibian students studied in cohorts where possibility exists for the course to be bespoke. Although this is not conclusive, it provides some ground to argue for professional development tailored to the local context.

Secondly, as professional socialisation entails *transitioning from teacher to leader roles*, we found that most participants acquired the necessary skills on the job through middle and teacher leadership experiences, thereby making training retrospective. The majority of participants had moved up the ranks through the formal promotion route integrated into the system, which inadvertently led to their socialisation into the leadership roles. Experiences such as the ones detailed below were typical of [experiential] preparation for the current principals through the promotion route:

When I got here I was still a classroom teacher and then the headmaster said I was a hard-worker and he promoted me to a senior teacher. When the headmaster ... retired I became deputy and later I became the principal (Male principal, Botswana).

Where participants did not go through the formal promotion route, there was evidence of teacher leadership experiences, particularly in the South African and Namibian cases:

“The first school I said, that school will be a spring board to get me to a higher position, even for principalship. At the previous school I obviously took on tasks, volunteered to do a lot, I didn’t shy away from work, and that was also the formative years of my leadership as such” (Male principal, South Africa).

Professional socialisation offered by preparation programmes has been criticised for its inability to provide the prospective leaders with an adequate contextual experience that could prepare them for the actual job that they entered (Bengtson, 2014; Cowie and Crawford, 2008). This interpretation seems to be consistent with our participants’ experiences wherein a gap was reported to exist between training and the context. In this study, most participants had been appointed to the job before training, making experiential learning very significant. When training finally happened after years in leadership, it blurred the distinction between preparation and development, suggesting an imperfect fit of the model. When training is offered after placement in post, it arguably affords candidates the opportunity to apply theory to their school context, thus providing a fertile opportunity for situated contextual learning (Brody et al, 2010). However, while Brody et al contend that situated learning provides limited exposure, thus implying a limited preparatory function, the findings in our study suggest that retrospective leadership training coupled with experiential learning might have provided a useful learning space wherein participants were able to engage with the application of theory to their real world context, thereby creating a more realistic socialisation experience.

The third finding is totally unrelated, wherein leadership skills, knowledge and dispositions were learnt outside of the school context through community leadership such as the church and youth organisations. Several leaders in the Lesotho and Botswana context had been local chiefs while others had served in the army during a compulsory community service.

Thus, while training was an important part of the professional socialisation, our participants also acquired their “occupational identity” (Brody et al, 2013) through experiences on the job as middle leaders and teacher leaders. This suggests a blur between the professional and organisational stages as the latter focuses more on experiences from confirmation in post. Muddying the waters further, leadership skills and knowledge were not only learnt within the school context. Some leaders were community and traditional leaders such as local chiefs who benefited from transferring their skills and knowledge on leading people in the community to the school context and vice versa.

### *Organisational socialisation*

Organisational socialisation involves learning the culture of a particular organisation mostly after the first appointment. Our findings revealed two scenarios. The first was where socialisation was *left to chance*, being ad-hoc, informal and individual. In this scenario, school leaders hit the ground running, learning on the job using their own initiative and self-inducting. They draw upon their own experiences and make use of their intuition about what it means to be a school principal and what activities to prioritise. As another principal observed, “I relied on my love for teaching and my gut feeling”. Leaders in this scenario are likely to innovate and rebel against tradition since they may not have had an opportunity to form an idealised vision of the principalship role from close observation of their predecessors.

In the second scenario, there was evidence of *in-house professional development* in Botswana and *coaching* of HoDs in Namibia, which strengthened organisational socialisation and influenced effective succession planning. Although there was still no evidence of formal induction into the new roles, participants who had been part of in-house professional

development and received in-house promotion were more familiar with the school culture and had smoother and quicker socialisation into new roles. One Namibian principal, who was mentored as a HoD believed that it was absolutely essential to mentor HoDs and prepare them for the principalship:

“So, like I was mentored because he [my principal] was planning to go. So already I’m also trying to do the same thing. ... I usually involve my HOD, we do it [principal’s reports] together, ... so that if this Principal goes, that the HOD can take over” (Male Principal, Namibia).

This illustrates the coaching or ‘mentoring’ benefit enjoyed by those who received in-house promotion in which situation they were deeply familiar with the school context. We make this assertion very cautiously, as other findings revealed role tension between principals and their deputies, where the latter’s role only became visible when the principal was not around. Stevenson (2006, p. 416) argues that organisational socialisation processes come strongly to the fore as the organisation learns to adapt to the leader and when the leader learns to adapt to the organisation. This implies a reciprocal relationship where there is an interplay amongst the individual, the role and the context (Cottrell and James, 2016, p.7). It can be argued that in contexts where the candidate is already familiar with the environment and has been mentored into the role, learning about the role of the principal becomes easier. It is, however, in this scenario that leaders are more likely to conform to the status quo, as future heads are socialised into existing roles by existing mentors who are current principals acting as socialising agents (Crow, 2006). For instance, HoDs or deputy principals who were mentored in writing a principal’s report by their predecessors are less likely to adopt a new approach when they take up the leadership role, whereas others are more likely to be innovative, such as those who relied on their gut feeling.

#### *Personal socialisation*

Personal socialisation involves the change in self-identity that occurs as individuals assert themselves into their new role. Crow (2006) has suggested that personal socialisation can be part of professional and organisational socialisation. However, in this study, personal socialisation transpired through anticipatory, professional and organisational experiences, which provided learning opportunities that cultivated a leader’s sense of agency, morality and social justice. Most school principal participants were mature, long-term serving leaders who, because of their age and time on the job, had accrued a wealth of experience as well as additional qualifications, implying that experiences are used as a leadership-learning platform to change things, thereby strengthening leadership identity.

The South African case provides a more compelling example of personal socialisation wherein the leaders’ determination to change things for the better suggests a strong sense of agency. Many of the South African principals were alert to issues of exclusion and oppression, and this equity agenda significantly shaped their approach to leadership. This stemmed from their personal histories of growing up in a racially and economically divided country, a country which, two decades later remains threatened by the inequality of opportunities and lack of prosperity of previously disadvantaged individuals, schools and their communities. Observing this situation geared some participants into a particular kind of thinking that displays an interaction of values, political conscience and leadership influenced by social justice, as reflected in the extract below:

“... these are the children [black children] that are going to change this country. ... If we don’t put them in that sort of sense that they have this ability to do that, ... we’re in

serious trouble. You got to lay that solid foundation, and get rid of this tag ... that colour does not mean excellence. Colour means excellence if you're excellent" (Male Principal, South Africa).

For these leaders, who grew up mostly during the Apartheid South Africa, social and political activism was learnt and enacted in their communities from youth, thereby influencing their approach to leadership in schools. In fact one principal said,

"I think one of the things that shaped me was my involvement ... in student politics" (Male principal, South Africa).

Such statements resonated across this South African context. The most significant leadership roles that participants played in the community catalysed early political awareness that gave them a strong sense of responsibility due to their larger social context. In these contexts, [political] "activism" suggests an *extended identity of leadership* that commenced from community involvement through youth activities and went beyond the school as school leaders. This ongoing commitment to the struggle and related activities against the apartheid regime gave their leadership a political dimension.

The familial values instilled in childhood influenced some of the leaders' *sense of morality*, which taught them to treat people with fairness and inculcated a sense of "doing things right". This identity is seen within the context of school leadership, but it is expansive and includes the broader community where leaders see themselves as playing an array of leadership roles not necessarily restricted to schools but extending rather into the education department and the local community. This extended leadership role was seen as an opportunity to continue to serve the community. Asked where they saw themselves in five years' time, one of the participants responded as below:

"I would still like to be involved with special needs, even if I've retired. ... I would see myself doing something extra for the special needs, doing something extra for my learners, my students" (Female deputy principal, South Africa).

In this sense, the leaders' life becomes a life of service, "a calling" to be offered to the broader community, even after retirement. It is, arguably, a lifetime self-invention process that intensifies within a socio-political context as a leadership identity is internalised (Moorosi, 2014). Brody et al (2010) have suggested that the stages of socialisation approximate identity development wherein leader identity occurs as an ultimate outcome of the leadership socialisation. In this study, the early influences on values, attitudes and dispositions shaped the leadership practice of the participants from their beginnings as youth and as novice teachers to the point where they took up and practised the leadership role, wherein their identity as leaders became strengthened.

Thus, as Cottrell and James (2016) suggest, we find the concept of personal socialisation instrumental in facilitating a more complex view of socialisation, which, in turn, enables an understanding of the way a leader's identity evolves over time (Miscenko et al, 2017). Significantly, we find conviction in the assertion that a school leader's leadership identity is not confined to the school but starts at childhood and youth and gets consolidated throughout the leadership career journey.

## **Implications and conclusions**

The purpose of this study was to explore how a leadership socialisation and leader identity development of school leaders in the Southern African context unfolds. Based on our findings, we now wish to highlight some of the implications for the socialisation framework, particularly as it applies to school leadership in Southern Africa.

Findings from our study suggest that socialisation of school leaders is shaped by a range of factors from early childhood socialisation to later adult career socialisation. The findings further depict a relationship between leadership career socialisation and leader identity development. Through family values, youth activities and influences from school during student life, school leaders have developed characteristics that form their identities as leaders. These personal characteristics interact with professional and organisational practices to shape their socialisation into school leadership. Theory suggests that socialisation is a life course that takes shape through different stages and culminates in identity development. An understanding of how these behaviours, attitudes, skills, knowledge and dispositions are learned and internalised during early and later stages, has implications for leadership development programmes and broader socialisation.

An important aspect with significant implications for policy and practice is related to our findings on leadership preparation that we found to be unique to the studied contexts, wherein introduction to the school leadership role is identified early on during initial teacher education programmes. While we acknowledge that leadership and management modules are increasingly part of teacher training in other parts of the world, there are some caveats: this practice is unconventional as an approach to leadership preparation globally, its adequacy is questionable and its effect is not documented. However, in this study, it facilitated the principalship role conception, and while it was not ideal, the findings suggest that initial teacher training provided a good chance of universal training for leadership. We therefore suggest that integrating instructional leadership knowledge and practices into initial teacher education programmes needs to be more intentional, taking each country's contextual, geographical and economic realities into consideration. We align ourselves with literature that suggests an imperative to develop all teachers as leaders (Frost, 2008; Grant, 2006; Smylie and Eckert, 2017), particularly on the African continent where there are other more indigenous ways of developing the leadership skills, in order to expand the reservoir of leadership potential.

Additionally, while we hold fast to the idea of the development of formal leadership preparation programmes for school leaders in Africa, this may not be realistic in many of these contexts that are resource-deprived and face socio-geographical challenges. Therefore, introducing leadership theory and evidenced-based leadership practices during initial teacher education may be the best option for providing early awareness of the leadership role as possible pathway of career progression for all teachers, and particularly those belonging to minority groups that are less well-represented in leadership, such as women, people of colour and other minorities. In-service leadership training would, in this sense, provide a blended model that is based within a particular context, and which integrates theory and practice that arguably enhances both professional and organisational socialisation. In this way, governments, districts and schools would be investing in leaders who have not only shown interest in leadership but who have also shown potential and capability, as opposed to “an act of faith” (Cowie and Crawford, 2007, p.129).

In relation to good leadership practices identified in our study, we also suggest a more intentional utilisation of the members of school management teams, especially as an approach that recognises some roles (e.g deputy principalship and heads of department) as preparation for principalship. Good practices identified in the study include mentoring of middle leaders and in-house professional development of aspiring leaders. We recommend that a more conscious effort be made to clarify the deputy principal role, which should be projected not only as an assistive role but also as a role that entails leadership responsibilities in its own right.

A conscious recognition and valuing of the deputy principal role would ensure more authentic sharing of school leadership roles, allowing it to become a preparatory space for principalship succession planning that ultimately enhances organisational socialisation by ensuring recognition and acceptance when roles change. In her seminal work, Hart (1991, p.469) had suggested that succession and socialisation are “two sides of the same process” that involve the same group of people and that the two phenomena must always be studied together.

In terms of contribution to theory, our study sought to establish how socialisation of school leaders enhances leader identity development and how these processes could inform leadership development. We found this aspect quite puzzling: Our initial understanding of leadership identity was limited to school experiences of leadership and principalship role conception, wherein leader identity transitions from teacher identity. However, the findings suggest that most participants develop an identity as leaders through pre-socialising agents, long before they even assume a teaching career. Such early recognition and identification of leadership characteristics creates a dilemma for leadership socialisation theory; it exposes the overlap between the stages of socialisation that makes it difficult to distinguish between and separate the stages, thereby disrupting the norm in as far as the western socialisation stages are concerned. We acknowledge that this needs a great deal more scrutiny and a much more nuanced treatment of school leadership socialisation experiences within the African context, given its unique historical, cultural and social context. However, we do now know and can firmly assert that the values instilled in the African youth and the responsibilities taken during early formative years are often powerful initial indicators of an evolving leadership identity. This embryonic identity is then consolidated and extended into community as the child grows older, and it is herein that the developing leadership identity is affirmed (or not) through youth and community leadership roles. Such early involvement in student movements, whether political or social, introduces youth to forms of initial activism, which instils in them an early sense of social justice that defines their leadership practice. Initialising in the anticipation phase, this kind of activism was found to continue during the professional and organisational socialisation, even crystallising in personal socialisation, that is, beyond the school leadership experience. In this sense, the four stages of career socialisation have explanatory power on socialisation experiences of Southern African school leaders but evidently these experiences do not neatly fit in this framework, thereby suggesting the need for deeper theorisation.

With regard to research, we note that our participants comprised a rather unique group of committed school leaders with drive and initiative. While they all came from ordinary state controlled schools, most of the schools in this sample were outstanding in many respects and performed better than average academically, despite their socio-economic conditions and limited resources. The participants had developed resilience, were committed to the basics of schooling such as punctuality and time on task and, most importantly, teaching and learning was taking place in their schools. In thinking about the way forward for further research, we note that in all four geographical contexts, ours was a unique sample, which is to say that by selecting people, many of whom elected to self-develop and acted as leaders in urban and semi-urban areas and leaders in some of the best-performing schools in their contexts, we had found a group of privileged go-getters. The sample, therefore, does not represent the vast majority of school leaders in rural, township and other less resilient contexts. Many principals in Southern Africa have not had the opportunity and have neither the will nor interest and resources to do a leadership development course and self-develop through postgraduate study. Sadly, the majority of the schools in these four countries are performing poorly and are faced with many more significant challenges of limited resources, socio-geographical and socio-economic challenges. Hence, their socialisation experiences might well be different. Further research would need to focus on these areas, using targeted recruitment and sampling techniques that aim to include the less-resourced areas in research. We need to know more about these contexts,

so that systematic approaches to socialising school leaders can be developed that will, in turn, enhance the broader socialisation processes across more contexts. Further research is also needed to understand how leader identity influences school leaders' attempts to develop leadership skills and knowledge and how this might influence leadership development programmes. Findings in this study suggest a relationship between early formations of leadership identity and a life-time commitment to providing leadership for schools and communities. More research is needed into how this identity of leadership is shaped by cultural context and personal experiences so that deeper theorisation enriched by distinctive local African experiences can be developed.

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